

Consumers Cautioned about Wild Mushrooms

HELENA -- Wild mushrooms have been highly touted as a gourmet delicacy with exotic textures and flavors, but they have also been responsible for some of the most lethal types of food poisoning in the Northwest in recent years. There have been numerous poisonings ranging in severity from mild gastroenteritis to liver damage and even death.

Most problems relate to consumers being unfamiliar with the fungi commonly picked and eaten in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Separating the safe, edible species from their toxic counterparts can be difficult.

Morels are among the most common and sought after mushrooms. Like other wild fungi, morels have a toxic cousin that looks enough like a true morel to be mistaken for it and cause illness. Even true morels can cause illness if they are eaten uncooked or if they are contaminated with other substances.

There are three important safety considerations with morels. First, heat them to 160 degrees for 10 minutes or more (never eat them raw). This drives off volatile "methylhydrazines" that cause problems. Second, cook morels in a well-ventilated area and avoid breathing the vapors produced during cooking. Third, be absolutely certain about species identification by using a recognized identifier, or train to become one.

Tons of morels are harvested for human consumption in Montana forests, especially in the years that follow a forest fire. However, consumers should avoid buying morels or any wild mushrooms from unqualified vendors who are not recognized as competent in identification.

"Just because they look like morels and are being sold at farmers markets or at roadside stands does not mean that they are safe," said Howard Reid, Program Manager of the Montana Food, Drug and Cosmetics Program at the Food and Consumer Safety Section. Reid also discourages people from canning morels and other mushrooms at home.

Traditionally, the Food and Consumer Safety Section has not allowed wild mushrooms in Montana stores and restaurants. An exception has been made, however, in the case of morels that are identified by someone recognized as competent in identification of fungi, particularly morels.

"There are many qualified identifiers among the commercial pickers, sellers, and dealers of wild mushrooms," Reid said. "If a store or restaurant uses a qualified identifier, and if the morels are clean, fresh and uncontaminated, and most importantly, if they are prepared properly, no problems should be encountered." The morel policy is consistent with the policies of other Northwestern states that are used to regulate wild mushrooms in commercial establishments.

Information regarding morels and their identification can be obtained from the Western Montana Mycological Association at P.O. Box 7306, Missoula, 59807, <http://www.fungaljungal.org/> or your local health department. There are several handbooks, field guides and other publications that help in identification, but field guides should not be relied upon to differentiate toxic from non-toxic mushrooms -- use a reliable and recognized expert. Another good site on the Internet is www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~ohioline/hyg-fact/3000/3303.html.

Restaurants and licensed markets wishing to use morels can obtain additional information by contacting the Food and Consumer Safety Section at (406) 444-2408 or by contacting your local health agency.